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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000770

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM A/S DEWEY
DEPARTMENT ALSO FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL

E. O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PREL PREF SOCI PGOV VM RELFREE HUMANR

SUBJECT: A/S DEWEY PRESSES HO CHI MINH CITY LEADERSHIP ON
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

REF: HCMC 0766

1. (SBU) Summary. A/S Dewey raised issues of religious freedom during several official meetings in Ho Chi Minh City on August 19. Describing the GVN's record as uneven in the Central Highlands provinces he had visited, he registered disappointment that even in HCMC, there were sporadic reports of interference with worship and confiscation of religious materials. He also expressed dismay over a recent police raid on an unregistered "illegal" church in HCMC's District 11 (reftel). Despite that, A/S Dewey said he would return to the U.S. with a more balanced picture of the situation in Vietnam because of this visit. Local officials responded with the standard GVN refrain -- that the GVN encourages religious freedom, but cannot accept those who would use religion to disrupt the national unity. Mr. Dewey also mentioned, in general terms, his proposal to reopen processing in several categories of the old Orderly Departure Program. End summary.

2. (SBU) Assistant Secretary Dewey visited HCMC on August 19, after three days in the Central Highlands (to be reported septel). He raised issues of religious freedom at meetings with the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), the External Relations Office (ERO - local branch of the Foreign Ministry), and the HCMC People's Committee. He also stopped briefly at the headquarters and main church of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), the umbrella organization for all legal Protestant churches in Vietnam's southern 31 provinces and HCMC. Describing lack of religious freedom as a factor that causes people to become refugees, A/S Dewey told his interlocutors that he was returning to the U.S. with a mixed view of the ability of people to practice their faith freely in Vietnam. He praised what he considered to be positive efforts by the provincial administration in Lam Dong to register new Protestant churches, but noted the picture was less positive elsewhere. He praised the GVN decision to recognize the SECV, and pointed to the opening of the SECV seminary this past February as another positive step.

3. (SBU) During all three official meetings, A/S Dewey raised the case of an altercation at an unregistered "illegal" house church in District 11 of HCMC just the day before. He said he found it difficult to understand how Vietnam could profess to allow freedom of religion when police acted in "such a brutal fashion." While he told his Vietnamese interlocutors that he had hoped to go back to Washington with the sense that the situation in HCMC was generally positive, he said he was not sure how to explain this latest incident. He reminded CRA Chairman Nguyen Ngoc San that the "whole world is watching," and hoped local officials understood the effect of their actions on international opinion. He appealed to Chairman San to gain the immediate release of the two pastors who were reportedly being detained and provide some explanation of the incident before he departed Vietnam later that evening. Chairman San regretted that he had not heard anything about this development, but promised to investigate. He noted that district officials were sometimes slow to report back to the city government. Mr. San agreed it would be regrettable if the story were true, but he thought there might be more to the story. He returned to this incident unsolicited several times during the meeting and seemed genuinely concerned. (Note: Mr. San described himself as a religious person with an understanding of spiritual needs. He took great pride in telling A/S Dewey that he even had an altar at home, although he never specified the religion.)

4. (SBU) While Chairman San did contend that some religious believers violated the law by using freedom of religion to pursue political agendas, he also admitted that local officials at the grassroots level sometimes overstepped their bounds because they did not fully understand GVN policies. He mentioned two civil servants who had recently been disciplined for violating GVN policies toward religion, although he did not give any details. He said he had recently organized eight sessions with Protestant and Catholic clergy to teach local officials more about religious practices. Mr. San was somewhat inconsistent, however, when he tried to describe the Catch-22 situation unregistered churches are in. These house churches are generally left alone and allowed to operate "as long as they do not do anything to disrupt national unity." Yet their "illegal" status also means they can be shut down or have their property/belongings confiscated at any time, i.e. their "religious freedom" only lasts as long as they do not cross some arbitrary, invisible line. Mr. San noted that the CRA was still awaiting the green light from Hanoi to register

additional Protestant churches not affiliated with the SECV, but assured Mr. Dewey that those believers would be allowed to carry on their activities in the meantime. He said the CRA welcomed the printing of Bibles by the SECV and only restricted importation of "those books which incite instability."

15. (SBU) Speaking more generally about what he described as the "harmonious development" of religious practices in HCMC, Mr. San gave statistics on growing numbers of believers and construction of new houses of worship. He said there were two million religious believers of all faiths in the city -- one million Buddhists, 500,000 Catholics, 30,000 Protestants (worshipping at 41 registered churches), and unspecified numbers of Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Muslims, Hindus, and Bahai. Reiterating that the policy of the GVN was to promote the development of religion in Vietnam, he added the refrain that Vietnam's long history of war has led it to value freedom and national unity. Mr. Dewey agreed that it was acceptable to differentiate between religious believers and those with a political agenda, but stressed the need to close the gap between GVN official policy allowing believers to practice their religion and inconsistent implementation of that policy at the local level. Making clear the USG strongly supported the territorial integrity of Vietnam, Mr. Dewey pointed out that religious diversity was actually part of America's strength.

16. (SBU) Mr. Dewey's other meetings covered nearly the exact same ground, with all of his interlocutors seeking to demonstrate progress on religious freedom by citing the growth in numbers of worshippers. All recited some variation of the same mantra that religious freedom is respected, but not for those with a political agenda. ERO Director Le Quoc Hung added another wrinkle, by contrasting the importance of stability to attracting foreign investment with the fact that religion(s) was often associated with foreign invaders in Vietnam. As did all of the GVN officials, Director Hung stressed there has been enormous progress in recent years, but that balancing religious freedom with security/stability concerns requires a "step-by-step" approach.

17. (U) A/S Dewey did not clear on this message.
YAMAUCHI